

Article by Julia Carlomagno

THE MEMBER OF THE WEDDING

Carson McCullers

Carson McCullers (1917–1967) was an acclaimed American author who wrote several highly regarded novels, short stories, plays and essays. Many of her novels feature characters who are social misfits, and her work often explores the tension between belonging to a group and expressing individuality.

The Member of the Wedding (1946), McCullers' third novel, tells the story of Frankie Addams, a 12-year-old tomboy who feels as if she does not belong anywhere. Frankie fantasises about taking part in her brother's wedding at Winter Hill. She believes that this experience will unite her with her brother and his wife; however, ironically, it only separates her further from them.

As several of the details are similar to situations and events in her own life, *The Member of the Wedding* is often regarded as McCullers' most autobiographical work. Frankie lives in an unnamed town that is based partly on McCullers' own hometown of Columbus, Georgia; and McCullers' father, like Frankie's, was a jeweller. McCullers has also written of her own adolescent awkwardness, and a feeling that she 'was not a member' (p.17) of the community around her.

In 1950, McCullers adapted the novel into a play. It was later adapted to film and a television movie.

Identity and Belonging in The Member of the Wedding

Adolescence can be a difficult period because it brings changes in the way individuals see themselves, and the way they want others to see them. Their sense of identity seems fluid and uncertain as they face the confusion of being caught between childhood and adulthood. Many adolescents feel a yearning to be treated as adults while also desiring to maintain the innocence of their childhoods.

The groups that adolescents belong to play crucial roles in shaping their identities. In *The Member of the Wedding*, McCullers explores the ways in which an adolescent identity changes as Frankie rejects the groups she has belonged to since childhood, such as family. Frankie's desperation to belong to a new group stems from her fear of being labelled an outsider – a fear that is heightened because everyone except her seems to belong somewhere. This intensifies her longing to fit in and leads her to imagine a solution to her loneliness. Yet Frankie is also anxious about change because she observes that people often shape their behaviours and beliefs to fit in with a group, compromising their individuality. Throughout the narrative Frankie struggles with these dual impulses: to belong to a group, and to be free to express her individuality.

The novel's setting is a town in the Deep South where racial, sexual and political tensions are rife. In this society, individuals are often judged by the groups they belong to and certain groups are marginalised. We witness Frankie move from naivety to realism, a progression that could be viewed as a metaphor for the way in which individuals come to adopt the prevailing attitudes of their society, taking on conventional opinions about race and gender.

Identity depends on a strong sense of belonging

People often come to a fuller understanding of their identity with reference to where they belong. McCullers captures Frankie at a period in her life when her identity is fragile because it is forming and changing; it is also a time when she lacks a strong sense of belonging to a group or to her wider society.

Frankie's evolving self-image is reflected in the way that her name changes in each section of the text, from Frankie to F. Jasmine to Frances. Each change represents a shift in her identity as she matures. The idea that Frankie changes so much she needs to be renamed suggests that as our identities evolve we turn into different people. However, other characters continue to call her Frankie, indicating that while she seeks to establish a different version of her 'self', others see her identity as essentially unchanged.

Frankie is introduced to us as someone without a place, a 'member of nothing in the world' (p.7). Her demeanour and appearance mark her as an outsider: gangly and awkward, she is too tall to play with children, but too 'young and mean' (p.17) to join the teenage girls who cross her yard on their way to parties. She worries that she will grow into a freak. Frankie's confusion about her nascent identity causes her to feel isolated and lonely; to others she appears an 'unjoined person' who 'hung around in doorways' (p.7), desperate for someone to invite her in. The word 'unjoined' has a double meaning here: in a literal sense, it refers to the fact that Frankie is not joined to a group and symbolically it implies that she is not yet fully joined together, not yet a complete person.

Frankie is desperate to belong during this period because she faces unsettling changes and, as her identity is fragile, she needs support to cope with them. The wedding prompts her to realise, perhaps for the first time, that she could find herself alone. Frankie's family fractured when her mother died and her father began working long hours and returning home irregularly. Now she faces its disintegration as her only sibling, Jarvis, is about to begin a new family with Janice, essentially leaving Frankie behind. She wants to find a place to belong in order to orient herself in a world that is changing around her.

Frankie's feeling that she is separate from, but in need of, those around her is epitomised by the unfinished music she hears playing one August night (pp. 54–5). A jazz musician breaks off at precisely the point where the music should reach a conclusion, leaving her unsettled. The sudden silence jars Frankie because it represents both her isolation from others and the incompleteness she feels in herself. Frankie is in her own way an unfinished note, striking out and fading to silence. In the same way that a single note cannot make music, Frankie feels that she needs to be part of a larger group in order to define herself in this time of transition. Her desire to develop her identity is inextricably linked to her desire to belong, as she sees each making the other possible.

Discussion questions

- Our identities are often formed in response to changes occurring around us. In what ways does the wedding prompt Frankie to question her identity? Can an individual accept change more easily if they have others to offer guidance and support?
- While Frankie never knew her mother, the death had a large impact on her family. How do you think being motherless has influenced Frankie's identity? Can a sense of feeling isolated sometimes prompt individuals to reach out to others?

We do not always choose the groups we belong to

Sometimes individuals are cast into groups to which they feel little connection. Through Frankie, the text reveals that we often yearn to belong to another group, but forget to value the people and places to which we already belong. While Frankie is introduced to us as 'a member of nothing' (p.7), we soon learn that is not true. The statement reflects the way in which Frankie sees her situation, but her view is subjective. Frankie already belongs to the 'terrible summer we of herself and John Henry and Berenice' (p.53), a group brought together by circumstance. When Frankie feels she is not a member, we can take this to mean that she does not belong to a group she deems important – one that has social prestige.

When Jarvis and Janice arrive from Winter Hill, Frankie is overcome with admiration for them and yearning for the exciting life they represent. It seems to Frankie that this is her opportunity to choose where she belongs. She calls the two 'the we of me' (p.53), suggesting that only they can make her into a complete person. At the end of Part I Frankie connects her emotion for them to the idea that in joining them she would belong somewhere important: 'She loved her brother and the bride and she was a member of the wedding' (p.57).

In a literal sense, we can see that Jarvis and Janice are the 'we' of Frankie because they are extensions of her personality. Frankie's desire to belong to a group with social prestige has led her to imagine an emotional connection between herself, Jarvis and Janice. She has projected onto them her own desires to belong, travel

and be famous, until they have come to symbolise everything she wants from life. We know before Frankie does that she will never belong with them. The affinity she feels with them is not based on any objective facts, but rather on what she believes them to be like. We also see that Frankie's real emotional connection is to Berenice and John Henry, with whom she can be herself. This suggests that we form important connections with those around us, even if we did not choose their company.

Discussion questions

- Why is it important to Frankie to choose where she belongs? What value does she see in being a member of a chosen group?
- Frankie imagines she will travel the world with Jarvis and Janice, but this proves a fantasy. What role do imaginary groups play in forming our identities?

Our social position influences our identities

Where we sit in the social hierarchy can affect how we see and how we feel about ourselves. Frankie, Berenice and John Henry are all outsiders because they exist on the periphery of other groups. Frankie is on the cusp of adulthood, older than the summer children who holler 'Is it cold up there?' yet not old enough to join the grown people, whose comments make her 'shrivel on her heels' (p.25). She longs to go dancing with teens at the Blue Moon, but her sexual naivety makes her afraid to do so. Berenice, a black maid working for a white family, lives between the black population of Sugarville and the white population of the town centre. John Henry is a child, but looks and acts like an old man. He identifies more strongly with women than with men, dressing up in Berenice's high heels and Frankie's costumes, and imitating the Pin Head girl as she 'skipped and giggled and sassed around' (p.27) at the fair grounds.

To emphasise that the trio are on the margins of society, McCullers associates them with the imagery of freaks. Like freaks, they are defined by their extreme or unusual physical characteristics: Frankie is too tall to fit beneath the arbour, and fears she will end up over nine feet tall (p.25); Berenice has a glass eye differently coloured from

her normal one (p.117); and John Henry is associated with the symbolism of clocks – Frankie even fancies she can feel him ticking, as if he is a mechanical boy (p.21).

Through Frankie, we can see that an individual's identity can change depending on how they perceive their position in the social hierarchy. In Part I Frankie watches performers in the Freak Pavilion at a carnival and in Part II she passes the jail on the way to Big Mama's house. On both occasions she feels the same sense of being recognised: 'it seemed to her that they had looked at her in a secret way and tried to connect their eyes with hers, as though to say: we know you' (p.27). Frankie imagines a connection with those on the social periphery because she sees herself as one of them. Yet at the novel's end, Frankie's identity has changed and she no longer feels a connection to the carnival freaks. This shows us that identity can be influenced by our position in society, and by how positively or negatively we perceive that position. Those who live on the margins of society may shape their identity around how they are perceived, and their sense of self may be unduly negative. Similarly, when people feel valued by society they often view themselves positively.

Discussion questions

- Frankie's belief that she is an outsider shapes her identity. How does it affect the way she behaves towards others? What does this tell us about the importance of treating people fairly?

The groups we belong to define our identities

We often define one another with reference to the groups we belong to. In the 1940s, the southern states of America were brimming with prejudice, particularly regarding race and sexuality. Whether one was deemed part of a particular group often depended on their physical appearance: the colour of their skin or their gender.

During this period, African Americans had few rights and were subjected to numerous forms of discrimination. Many Southern towns were racially segregated, which meant that black people could not attend the same schools, sit in the same parts of a cinema or even drink in the same bars as white people. Most black people in these towns had low-paying jobs, often as domestic servants or janitors.

In *The Member of the Wedding*, Berenice is defined by the colour of her skin. She must live in Sugarville and she works as a domestic servant for a white family. On the way to Winter Hill, she is forced to sit in the back of the bus with the other black people. As she tells Frankie:

Everybody is caught one way or another. But they done drawn completely extra bounds around all coloured people. They done squeezed us off in one corner by ourself. (p.141)

Her son, Honey Brown, is an intelligent student who feels frustrated that, as a black man in a racially segregated town, his opportunities are limited – a frustration that eventually leads him to crime. By the novel's end Honey is in jail, and we fear that his promise will not be realised.

While some individuals are discriminated against on the basis of race, others are judged for their gender preferences. Berenice claims that Lily Mae Jenkins, a local man who dresses as a woman, has 'changed his nature and his sex' (p.96), implying that his actions are against the natural order. Invoking the conventional morality of the time, she links it to other unpalatable behaviour such as violence. Interestingly, Berenice's prejudice against crossdressing does not extend to John Henry, perhaps because she does not want to think badly of someone she loves. This shows that a person's attitudes and emotions influence the way that they define others. A prejudice reflects as much about those applying it as those who are subject to it.

Discussion question

- Berenice says of Honey Brown, 'He feel like he got to break something or break himself' (p.141). Why do Honey Brown and Berenice feel 'caught' by their identities? In what ways does being 'caught' influence the way they act?

Belonging can conflict with individuality

In order to belong to a group, we have to give up some of our individual freedom. Sometimes we may even have to compromise certain personal beliefs or modify our behaviour in order to fit in with a group. Yet belonging to a group can also widen our experiences and help us to mature. Through Frankie, McCullers suggests that belonging can facilitate personal growth.

Throughout much of the text, Frankie wrestles with her desire to belong and her impulse to be free from rules and boundaries. We see this ambivalence in Frankie's relationship with Berenice and John Henry. Frankie believes the two restrict her freedom because they will not allow her to act as she pleases. Berenice imposes limits on Frankie's behaviour – including her habit of throwing knives around the kitchen – and dismisses many of Frankie's deeply held feelings. John Henry, with his innocent and saintly demeanour, makes Frankie feel guilty for expressing cruel thoughts about others.

The constraint that Frankie feels when she is with them is reflected in the setting. Trapped in a seemingly endless summer, the hot, noisy kitchen forms a barrier between her world and everything that is happening outside. The contrast between the dangers outside and the safety inside is all the more marked when news interrupts the otherwise constant stream of radio music. At these points Frankie feels acutely that she is missing out on life. The moths that bang against her window each night symbolise this sense of confinement:

‘To me it is the irony of fate,’ she said. ‘The way they come here. Those moths could fly anywhere. Yet they keep hanging around the windows of this house.’ (pp.19–20)

In Jarvis and Janice, Frankie initially believes that she has found a group who will respect her individuality. They will make her feel as if she belongs but will not ask her to change. She fantasises that once she arrives in Winter Hill she can truly be herself – no longer emotionally and intellectually confined but free to express her opinions and desires without being reprimanded. This idyllic vision is reflected in Frankie's fantasies of what Winter Hill will look like. While to Frankie the kitchen is almost a vision of hell, the quiet, cold world of Winter Hill is like a vision of heaven, representing possibility and personal freedom.

When Frankie's connection to Jarvis and Janice proves a fantasy, McCullers is demonstrating that it is impossible to feel a strong sense of belonging to others without in some way altering your identity to accommodate their perspective. That is, the conflict between belonging and individuality can be seen as a positive force, since it compels us to reflect on and modify our sense of self. We need to understand someone in order to feel close to them; as we come to understand them, our own identities inevitably change because our view of the world expands to

include another's perspective. While Frankie has been imagining a connection to Jarvis and Janice she has in fact been more alone than ever. Her perspective is narrowed because she has rejected her real connection to Berenice and John Henry in favour of a fantasy.

Discussion question

- Frankie says to Berenice, 'you see all the people. And to me they look loose ... you don't see what joins them up together' (p.142). What does Frankie mean by this comment? Can individuals develop their identities outside of a group?

Individual growth comes from belonging

Although we see the tension between belonging to a group and expressing individuality played out in Frankie's fantasies and behaviour, McCullers shows us that individuals gain more from belonging to a group than from living in isolation. Most groups have certain expectations that members must conform to, but they also provide a forum in which individuals make valuable connections with others and enrich their identities.

Frankie comes to understand that she can only grow and mature by coming into contact with others. In Part III she forms a new connection with Mary Littlejohn, giving her exposure to ideas that previously had no bearing on her life, such as Catholicism, art and poetry. We can see Frankie's identity changing as she adapts her behaviour and beliefs in order to fit in with the Littlejohn family. For example, she cannot visit the Freak Pavilion because Mrs Littlejohn feels it 'morbid' (p.188). Yet ultimately Frankie gains more from feeling that she belongs than she does from retaining the freedom to act however she wants. Frankie at the novel's end is more mature and less morose – we see this in the 'instant shock of happiness' (p.190) she feels in the final line.

Members of a group can also teach others, sharing the wisdom they have gained from their life experiences. As a young woman, Berenice had few to instruct her about relationships. She had a happy marriage with Ludie, but when he died she

sought to repeat it with a series of unsuitable men. Berenice does not want Frankie and John Henry to make the same mistakes, so she passes her wisdom onto them:

‘Why, don’t you see what I was doing?’ asked Berenice. ‘I loved Ludie and he was the first man I loved. Therefore, I had to go and copy myself forever afterward. What I did was to marry off little pieces of Ludie whenever I came across them. It was just my misfortune they all turned out to be the wrong pieces. My intention was to repeat me and Ludie. Now don’t you see?’ (pp.126–7)

In explaining this, Berenice is seeking to create a form of collective wisdom from which Frankie and John Henry also learn. When Frankie sets out for Winter Hill, she has certain expectations of what she will find there, and is crushed when they’re proven false. This experience helps her to mature but, like Berenice’s experience, it also has the potential to be instructive for others. Similarly, McCullers draws on some of her childhood emotions in writing this book, and reading it may help us to better understand our own adolescent turmoil. These examples show us that individuality can play an important role within groups because each member brings the wisdom they have learnt and uses it to enrich the group’s collective knowledge.

Discussion questions

- Do you think people need to belong to a group in order to learn from others?
- What do you think Frankie learns (about herself, as well as about others) from Berenice and John Henry?

SAMPLE SCENE ANALYSIS

Re-read the passage from ‘When they began the second round ...’ (p.114) to ‘the end of the long stale afternoons’ (p.116).

Summary

Sitting at the kitchen table, Frankie, Berenice and John Henry discuss what they would change about the world if they were God. In Berenice’s ideal world, people would be one colour, war would not occur and Ludie would be alive. In Frankie’s world, summer would not exist and everyone would belong to one world club and be able to change sex. In John Henry’s world, there would be chocolate dirt and lemonade rain, and people would be half male and half female.

Questions for exploring ideas

- What do the changes that Berenice would make in her ideal world suggest about her experience of the real world?
- ‘She belonged to no club and was a member of nothing in the world.’ Why is it so important for Frankie to belong to a club? What would be the benefits of everyone belonging to one world club?
- ‘She planned it so that people could instantly change back and forth from boys to girls, whichever way they felt like and wanted.’ Why does Frankie want people to be able to switch sexes? What is the significance of John Henry saying he wanted everyone to be ‘half boy and half girl’?
- Why is Berenice’s world described as ‘round and just and reasonable’? Are Frankie’s and John Henry’s worlds any less reasonable?
- What do their various ideal worlds say about each of their personalities? For each character, consider: Are they idealists or realists? What experiences in their own lives have led them to see the value in the changes they suggest? How are their ideal worlds limited by their perspectives?

Focus on text features

As well as drawing on ideas from *The Member of the Wedding* in your writing about Exploring Issues of Identity and Belonging, remember that the language and style of your writing may be inspired by the structures and features of the text. For example, the following aspects of *The Member of the Wedding* may influence how you choose to use language in the text you create.

- Idiomatic language, such as that spoken by Frankie and Berenice, gives your writing authenticity.
- Recurring images that have symbolic meaning, such as the moths that fly into Frankie’s windows to represent the confined nature of her world, allow you to ‘show’ rather than ‘tell’.
- A third-person narrative that closely follows one character allows the reader to sympathise but also to view that character from a distance, thus forming their own impressions and judgements of the character.

- Setting the events amid a tumultuous period, such as World War II, can imbue the story with a sense of violence or fear.

Points of view on the Context

These discussion questions and activities are designed to help you reflect on and refer to ideas raised by the Context in your chosen text by developing your own point of view on these ideas.

For further discussion/writing

- Berenice tells Frankie: 'We all of us somehow caught' (p.141). In what ways are you 'caught' by the groups you belong to?
- After being rejected at Winter Hill, Frankie uses the word 'nigger' to describe coloured people as 'now she hated everyone and wanted only to spite and shame' (p.168). How have the events at Winter Hill shaped Frankie's view of the world? Has this incident caused a permanent change in her identity? How does it affect the way she views society and her place in it?
- Have you ever felt as if you didn't belong anywhere? Think of a time when you felt out of place. What led you to feel like this? Do you still feel the same way? If not, what happened to change your view?
- In Part I, time seems to move slowly. Yet at the end of Part III, John Henry's death and Berenice's decision to marry come suddenly. Why would McCullers have chosen to tell the story like this? What is she suggesting about the way we see time as we age? Do our identities change with time?

Activities

- 'While the story follows Frankie's quest to discover her identity, Berenice's identity undergoes a similar transformation.' In small groups, discuss whether you agree with this contention.
- Pretend you are a politician, and prepare the speech you would give if asked to talk about your ideal world. Explain how your world differs from those presented in the book. Discuss what values underlie your ideal world, and which of these values you share with important groups in your life.

- 'Frankie's experience at Winter Hill shows us that feeling out of place has a greater influence on our identity than feeling as if we belong.' Using dot points, draw up two essay plans for this contention, one arguing for it and one against it.
- Write and perform a dialogue between two characters in the text, showing how their identities have changed by the end of the narrative. For example, you could write a conversation between Frankie and Berenice in which they compare how their views on love have altered since the beginning of summer, or reflect on whether John Henry's death has led them to change their ideal worlds.

The text

McCullers, Carson 2008, *The Member of the Wedding*, Penguin, London.